

## **Carl Sandburg**

David Cheatwood  
Oregon High School, Oregon  
Teacher: Sara Werckle

Carl Sandburg is one of Illinois' most famous personalities. Carl Sandburg is remembered for a variety of reasons. He lived a life of variety. He evolved from a man among the poor into a famous thinker and writer and he contributed tremendously to society.

Sandburg grew up in a poor family. His mother and father were parents to five children. Carl, Emil, Fred, Esther and Martha were all raised in a house on East Berrien Street in Galesburg, Illinois. As he grew up he had opportunities to work in many different fields. Sandburg spent part of his career as a milk delivery man, ice harvester, bricklayer, wheat thresher, and shoe shiner. After all of this, he even spent some time traveling as a hobo, starting in 1897.

Carl's interest in politics sparked early in his life. When he was six, Sandburg's father took him to a Republican rally, saying it "would be good to see." At the rally, lines of Republicans carried torches and chanted support for Blaine, their presidential candidate. He was running against Grover Cleveland. Seeing this rally inspired Carl to believe that he was "a young Republican, a six-year-old Republican." Cleveland won the election. This was only what started Carl's interest and in no way had he developed real views. He continued to be politically uncertain until he became a hobo. During these years of traveling with men of no material wealth he observed the dichotomy between the rich and poor. This perspective made him skeptical about justice in a system of capitalism. When the Spanish-American War began in 1898, Sandburg joined the

military service. He was stationed in Puerto Rico but never saw any combat except that against the elements. After his service, he enrolled in Lombard College. There he developed permanent political views and developed himself as a writer. He worked through college as a fireman.

While at Lombard, Sandburg joined a group called the Poor Writers' Club, which was founded by one who became Sandburg's mentor, Professor Phillip Green Wright. Wright believed in liberal politics and willingly encouraged Sandburg's interest in the subject. By the end of Sandburg's college career he had accepted Wright's political views and considered himself a socialist. Sandburg started writing poetry quite seriously. Wright became Sandburg's first publisher and allowed him to use his basement printing press to print copies of his first poetry book, In Reckless Ecstasy, in 1904. This was just the beginning for Sandburg. He went on to publish two more books with Wright's help, Incidental and The Plaint of a Rose. Sandburg became a strong supporter of the Social Democratic Party of Wisconsin. It was here that he met his wife, Lilian Paula Steichen. With a family came new financial needs and Sandburg started a career as a journalist. He began to gather fame after some of his poems were published in Poetry magazine. His book, Chicago Poems was his first professionally published book. After Sandburg published a few books of poetry and a book of children's stories, his publisher came to him with a proposition that would cement Sandburg's position in the American pantheon of writers. He was asked to write a children's biography of Abe Lincoln. When he was finished, the result was better than the request. Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years brought Sandburg wealth he had never before possessed. The next four volumes, Abraham Lincoln: The War Years, won Sandburg a Pulitzer Prize.

Sandburg's brother-in-law, Edward Steichen, once said, "On the day God made Carl he didn't do anything else that day." Sandburg died in 1967. He left behind several novels and countless poems as well as the only Pulitzer Prize ever awarded for an outstanding biography. Sandburg has certainly left his mark on the world. It is a pity that such great men still have so few days to spend on this earth. [From Carl Sandburg, Always the Young Strangers; AndyBarr.com Productions, "Carl Sandburg-Chicago Poems," <http://carl-sandburg.com/index.htm> (Oct 8, 2005); and Harry Golden. Carl Sandburg.]